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An Examination of the First Years: Novice ESOL Teachers' Experiences with Loneliness and Stress

Randal K. Johnson

Western Oregon University, rajohnson11@wou.edu

Mycah L. Harrold

Western Oregon University, mharrold11@mail.wou.edu

Daisy J. Cochran

Western Oregon University, dcochran09@mail.wou.edu

Debi Brannan Ph.D.

Western Oregon University, brannand@wou.edu

Tasha Bleistein

Azusa Pacific, tbleistein@apu.edu

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An Examination of the First Years: Novice ESOL Teachers' Experiences with Loneliness and Stress

Abstract

The first years of work for new teachers can be particularly difficult; this is especially true for English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Warford & Reeves, 2003). This study was designed to explore potential issues within this important group and specifically examined the relationship between loneliness and stress for novice ESOL teachers. Forty-seven novice ESOL teachers completed self-report measures assessing their levels of perceived stress and loneliness. The results revealed that loneliness significantly predicted perceived stress ($\beta = .51, p < .001$). Furthermore, exploratory analyses indicated that marital status influenced loneliness ratings but not stress levels. These findings indicate that for novice teachers that often teach abroad, feelings of loneliness are an important issue to consider.

Keywords

novice, TESOL, ESOL, loneliness, stress, teachers

Cover Page Footnote

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An Examination of the First Years: Novice ESOL Teachers' Experiences with Loneliness and Stress

Randal K. Johnson Western Oregon University
Myciah L. Harrold Western Oregon University
Daisy J. Cochran Western Oregon University
Debi Brannan Western Oregon University
Tasha Bleistein Azusa Pacific University

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Debi Brannan

For new teachers, the first years can be particularly difficult; this is especially true for ESOL teachers (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Warford & Reeves, 2003). To further examine potential issues for this important group, this study specifically examined the relationship between loneliness and stress for novice Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Forty-seven novice TESOL professionals completed self-report measures assessing their levels of perceived stress and loneliness. The results revealed that loneliness significantly predicted perceived stress ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, exploratory analyses indicated that marital status influenced loneliness ratings but not stress levels. These findings indicate that for novice teachers that often teach abroad, feelings of loneliness are an important issue to consider.

Keywords: novice, TESOL, ESOL, loneliness, stress, teachers

Teaching can be a stressful and psychologically demanding profession. In order to be successful in the field, teachers are responsible for completing a variety of tasks inside and outside of the classroom and are often required to assume multiple roles in the communities that they serve (Dussault, Deaudelin, Royer, & Loiselle, 1999). Managing these responsibilities can be especially challenging for novice teachers who have little experience pragmatically engaging in the pedagogical process (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Novice teachers are often expected to independently adapt to these stressors with little direct assistance from colleagues or mentors (Farrell, 2003; Farrell, 2006; Peacock, 2009), which may result in feelings of isolation and loneliness (Flinders, 1988; Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992). Importantly, research has demonstrated that these feelings of loneliness can be distressing and can actually increase the amount of stress that teachers normally encounter (Dussault et al., 1999).

Much of the research pertaining to loneliness and stress among teachers has focused on those working in traditional teaching environments. These studies have not fully examined how loneliness may increase stress levels for teachers working in specialized fields or nontraditional classrooms. Consequently, further research is needed to gain a better understanding of the relationship between loneliness and stress for teachers that work with unique student populations. Moreover, research suggests that novice teachers in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) may be a

particularly vulnerable teaching population that requires further examination (Farrell, 2009).

English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers are trained to teach English to second language learners from areas where English is not the primary language or mother tongue, and can choose to provide these services domestically or in students' home countries. Teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms may be particularly challenging, and research has demonstrated that novice ESOL teachers are especially likely to experience stressful situations that encourage early attrition from the field (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Maciejewski, 2007; Peacock, 2009). TESOL teachers face unique professional challenges; most significantly, they work with learners who are crossing linguistic or cultural boundaries within the classroom. In addition, TESOL educators who work outside of their home country may have a diminished social support network. Research has also shown that ESOL educators in U.S. classrooms feel isolated from mainstream classroom teachers due to school policies or attitudes toward students (DelliCarpini, 2009). Even English language educators who are working within their own country with students from the same cultural background (e.g., a Chinese English teacher working with Chinese English learners) face the stress of engaging students in a language that may seem impractical and unnecessary. In order to explore how loneliness influences overall feelings of distress experienced by novice ESOL teachers, the current study examined the correlational relationship between novice

ESOL teachers' perceptions of loneliness and their perceptions of stress. In addition, this study assessed whether marital status and gender were uniquely associated with novice ESOL teachers' perceptions of loneliness or stress, and if these two factors influenced the relationship between perceptions of loneliness and stress.

Loneliness

Perlman and Peplau (1981) posited that the experience of loneliness is often associated with powerful emotions that are caused by the perception that social resources, interpersonal connections, or conduits for these resources and connections are qualitatively or quantitatively deficient. Furthermore, Hawkley, Brown, and Cacioppo (2005) suggested that general feelings of loneliness are likely to have multiple potential causes, including perceptions of being rejected or isolated, having inadequate emotional and instrumental social support from interpersonal interactions and friendships, and lacking a sense of connectedness within the larger community. Importantly, loneliness is associated with a variety of negative psychological, physical, and social outcomes. According to research by Segrin and Passalacqua (2010) that assessed the mediational relationship between loneliness, stress, social support, and health behaviors, loneliness is highly correlated with perceived stress and is indirectly related to negative health behaviors due to its association with higher levels of perceived stress. Moreover, loneliness has been found to negatively impact career outcomes as well. In a study examining how the quality of work relationships influences organizational commitment and satisfaction with life, Yilmaz (2008) found that employees who perceived their relationships with colleagues as being inadequate reported less satisfaction with life and lower levels of organizational commitment.

Loneliness in Teachers

Several studies have indicated that there are multiple factors that increase the likelihood that teachers, specifically, will experience social isolation and subsequent feelings of loneliness (Flinders, 1988; Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992). Researchers have suggested that because teachers encounter many potentially isolating experiences, they appear to have a relatively high susceptibility to developing perceptions of loneliness and stress. For example, in many universities abroad, the "foreign" English teacher is not invited to faculty meetings where the local professors socialize and discuss policies, curriculum, and students. Research suggests that teachers are expected to be independent, self-sufficient units who work specifically in their own classroom, a phenomenon deemed "egg-crate isolation" (Flinders, 1988; Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992). Flinders (1988) posits that while teachers

may have thousands of social interactions in the course of a day, it is the perception of these social interactions that makes the difference; teachers likely feel that they are unable to communicate in a satisfying manner with their coworkers, and these unsatisfying interactions may cause them to feel misunderstood. This assertion was supported by Pithers and Fogarty's (1995) examination of whether perceptions of social isolation were more prevalent among teachers or urban professionals. This study demonstrated that teachers were much more likely to report being socially isolated and that these experiences with social isolation were highly associated with perceived stress.

Research has indicated that novice teachers may encounter special circumstances that make them more susceptible to feelings of loneliness. DelliCarpini (2009) interviewed 18 English as a Second Language (ESL) MA teacher candidates about their experiences working as novice teachers, and collaborating with mainstream English teacher candidates to develop interdisciplinary educational strategies for English Language Learners (ELL). Although they reported having high expectations on their first day of school, the novice ESL teachers indicated that the dismal condition of their resources, or lack of resources, decreased their enthusiasm for work (DelliCarpini, 2009). The novice ESL teachers also reported feeling as though they had little to no help from their mentors and reported inadequate access to their mentors (DelliCarpini, 2009). This lack of support and perceived isolation from other teachers led to the novice ESL teachers feeling unprepared for daily class activities, and questioning their ability to educate their students (DelliCarpini, 2009). These conditions could be especially problematic for novice teachers because inadequate interaction and support may hinder further professional development (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004) or increase the likelihood of the teachers leaving the field. The DelliCarpini (2009) study offers information that is pertinent and applicable to the current study; the findings, however, must be interpreted with some caution. The study was mostly exploratory and included a limited number of participants. However, it is noteworthy because it provides a research-based exploration of workplace isolation and a foundation for conducting research on other novice teacher populations. Currently, there is relatively little empirical research examining loneliness among novice teachers, and novice ESOL teachers, specifically, and the current study seeks to rectify this deficiency.

Perceived Stress in Teachers

The psychological and physiological effects of stress are experienced when an individual is overwhelmed with the demands of their environment (Cohen, Kessler, & Gordon, 1995). Because of various interpersonal

pressures such as interactions with coworkers, students, supervisors, and parents, research suggests that the teaching environment can be particularly stressful (Dussault et al., 1999). Furthermore, novice ESOL teachers, who feel unprepared for the teaching environment, may be especially susceptible to feelings of distress (Farrell, 2012). Teachers who report increased stress levels often report lower job satisfaction, decreased self-efficacy, and feelings of professional isolation (Dussault et al., 1999; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Additionally, having an impaired mind and body has been found to negatively affect work productivity and motivation (Van der Klink, Blonk, Schene, & Van Dijk, 2001). Importantly, experiencing these feelings of distress can significantly impact a teacher's overall job performance and satisfaction.

A factor that has been shown to affect teachers' perceived stress and self-efficacy is the gender of the teacher (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Klassen and Chiu (2010) reported that, of their sample, female teachers with the least experience were shown to be the most stressed. Differences in perceived stress levels were shown among gender through differences in self-reported perceived stress levels and heart rate throughout the school year (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Moya-Albiol, Serrano, & Salvador, 2010). Female teachers experienced more workload stress and classroom stress than male teachers (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). In general, regardless of gender, teachers with higher perceived stress will be more likely to leave the profession (Moya-Albiol, Serrano, & Salvador, 2010).

The Current Study

Although considerable literature exists regarding perceptions of stress and loneliness among traditional K-12 teachers, research pertaining to teachers in non-traditional roles, such as ESOL teachers, is lacking. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to supplement the literature and address a unique, but important, professional population. A relationship between stress and perceived social isolation in teachers, especially those new to the profession, has been established by previous research (Dussault et al., 1999; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). The current study assessed whether this relationship is present in novice ESOL teachers, specifically. Considering that previous research has demonstrated that different social factors may moderate this relationship in other teaching populations (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Moya-Albiol, Serrano, & Salvador, 2010), this study also explored whether the perceived stress-loneliness relationship is moderated by gender and marital status. Specifically, this study addressed 1) whether there was a relationship between loneliness and

stress, 2) whether gender moderates this relationship, and 3) whether relationship status moderates this association.

Methods

Participants

Invitations to participate in the study were emailed to 67 recent graduates (within three years) from two hybrid Master's level TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) graduate programs. These programs provide face-to-face and distance or online instruction, and allow students to pursue MA TESOL degrees from U.S. universities, while living around the world. The invitations were accepted by 70% (N=47) of the graduates. All participants had worked as teachers and 83% (N=39) of them were still employed at the time of the study.

Demographic data were also collected, such as marital status, gender, race, and number of children. Of those who participated in the study, 56% (N=26) were female. In addition, 67% (N=14) of the men were married or living with a partner, while only 35% (N=9) of the females were married. Overall, 40% (N=19) of participants reported having children. Also, 52% (N=11) of male participants and 31% (N=8) of female participants reported having children. Most participants originated from the United States (91%) and affiliated with being white (86%).

Those living in the United States equaled 47% (N=22). Fifty-three percent of participants (N=25) reported that they were teaching abroad, with 34% (N=16) teaching in China; 4% (N=2) in South Korea; and the remaining participants, 15% (N=7), within Australia, Honduras, Kazakhstan, Laos, Mongolia, Turkey, or Vietnam. Most participants taught in higher education, with 55% (N=25) at universities and 23% (N=11) in other adult schools.

Procedure

As part of a larger study, an email invitation was sent out to 67 ESOL teachers asking them to participate in this study. The individuals that chose to participate in the study were re-directed to a secure confidential survey site. Before they completed the survey, they reviewed the informed consent that explained details about the study. Demographic data were also collected prior to the study. The teachers were then asked to rate their perceived stress and answer a single item about their loneliness.

Measures

Loneliness. A single item from the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was employed to assess loneliness. Participants rated how frequently they felt lonely the past week on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). It is important to note that research has demonstrated that

single-item measures can reliably assess subjective mood (Burisch, 1984; Myers & Diener, 1995). More specifically, studies have indicated that a 1-item unidimensional scale for loneliness has comparable construct validity to other measures such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Pressman, Cohen, Miller, Barkin, & Rabin, 2005).

Stress. Stress was measured using the 4-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). This measure consists of four questions that assess how often feelings of stress were experienced within the previous month. These questions included “In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?” and “In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?” Participants responded by rating how often they experienced the feelings or situations presented by the questions using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). A composite perceived stress score was created for each participant by adding the scores from the four items on the PSS.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

First, when examining mean levels of our variables of interest, results revealed that for the entire sample, the mean level of loneliness was 1.91 (SD = 1.16). We then examined these variables by gender. Results revealed that for males, the average level of loneliness was 1.48 (SD = .87); for females, the mean level of loneliness was 2.27 (SD = 1.25).

To examine perceived stress, we obtained a sum rating of perceived stress for each participant (per Cohen et al., 1983) and results revealed that the overall mean perceived stress rating was 7.05 (SD = 2.33). When examining this variable by gender, results revealed that males' rating for perceived stress as 6.10 (SD = 1.70); females had a mean rating of 7.85 (SD = 2.49).

To further test these differences, an independent t-test was then conducted and results revealed that mean levels of loneliness were significantly higher among female teachers than males, $t(46) = -2.46$, $p = .02$. Interestingly, an analysis of the mode revealed that 71.4% of the men ($N = 15$) reported that they were “not at all” lonely; of those men, 14 reported being married or living with someone. In contrast, females' response patterns exhibited considerably more variability. When we examined whether marital status played a role in loneliness for each gender, results demonstrated that men who were married/living

with a partner were significantly less lonely compared to men who were single. More specifically, single men had an average rating of 2.43 (SD = .98) and men who were married/living with partner reported an average rating of loneliness of 1 (SD = .00); $t(19) = 5.63$, $p < .001$. Similar results were found for women, whereby single women had an average rating of loneliness of 2.59 (SD = 1.37); and women who were married/living with partner reported an average rating of 1.67 (SD = .71); $t(25) = 2.04$, $p = .05$.

Moreover, an independent sample t-test was conducted and there were significant gender differences in perceived stress, $t(45) = -2.74$, $p < .01$, such that the women participants reported higher levels of stress than men. When examining stress by marital status, results revealed that single men had a perceived stress rating of 7.00 (SD = 1.63) and men who were married/living with a partner reported perceived stress of 5.64 (SD = 1.60); t-tests revealed no significant differences between the two groups. Similar results were found for women, whereby the perceived stress rating for single women was 8.29 (SD = 2.62); and women who were married/living with partner reported 7.00 (SD = 2.12); again, no significant differences were found between single and married females. See table 1 for a visual summary of the means and standard deviations for loneliness and perceived stress categorized by gender and relationship status.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Loneliness and Perceived Stress

	Loneliness		Perceived Stress	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total Sample	1.91	1.16	7.05	2.33
Male				
Male Total	1.48	0.87	6.10	1.70
Single	2.43	0.98	7.00	1.63
In Relationship	1.00	0.00	5.64	1.60
Female				
Female Total	2.27	1.25	7.85	2.49
Single	2.59	1.37	8.29	2.62
In Relationship	1.67	0.71	7.00	2.12

Primary Analyses

To further analyze the possible connection between loneliness and stress in novice ESOL teachers, a hierarchical linear regression was conducted. Specifically, we regressed loneliness, marital status, and gender in a moderated model on perceived stress. To create an interaction term, the two independent variables in each model were multiplied (see Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken,

2003). In addition, because zero is a meaningful point on the loneliness measure (e.g., the participant reported not feeling lonely at all), the continuous variable was not centered before creating the interaction term. Results demonstrated that loneliness predicted perceived stress in the main effect models ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$), but there was no relationship between gender and perceived stress ($p = .12$). Further results indicated that there was no significant interaction between gender and loneliness on perceived stress ($\beta = -.01$, $p < .96$).

Another hierarchical linear regression was conducted to determine if marital status moderated the loneliness-stress relationship. The main effects revealed that there was only a significant association between loneliness and perceived stress ($\beta = .54$, $p = .001$). In the model that included the interaction term, there were no significant associations.

Discussion

ESOL teachers represent a unique portion of the teaching and professional population, often working in linguistically and culturally diverse classroom settings, either in their nation of origin or abroad. Although teaching, in general, can be a challenging and stressful profession, novices in the TESOL field are especially likely to encounter distressing and discouraging situations, which ultimately lead to a greater likelihood of exiting the field entirely (Peacock, 2009). In order to supplement the current understanding of the factors that influence novice ESOL teachers' mental health and occupational success, this study examined the relationship between loneliness and stress for 47 novice ESOL teachers.

Previous research has demonstrated that loneliness is correlated with stress for experienced teachers (Dussault et al., 1999), and consistent with these findings, regression analyses revealed that novice ESOL teachers who reported higher levels of loneliness were more likely to experience greater amounts of perceived stress than their less lonely counterparts. These results suggest that, similar to teachers working in traditional teaching fields, novice ESOL teachers are likely to be adversely affected by feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980) suggest that gender is not associated with variations in loneliness, and overall, gender appears to be an inconsistent predictor of loneliness with some studies finding that males are lonelier than females (Eshbaugh, 2008; Koc, 2012), and others finding that females are lonelier than males (Boomsma, Willemssen, Dolan, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2005; Rokach, 2000; Victor & Yang, 2012). The finding that women were lonelier than men could be arbitrary and reflect the inconsistencies in the literature. Additionally, research has

found that men are often more reluctant to admit experiencing negative emotions, in general (Borys & Perlman, 1985), and are less likely to discuss feelings of loneliness when they exhibit higher levels of masculinity (Cramer & Neyedly, 1998). However, these results could suggest that women did not have the same experiences or circumstances as men. Further research should explore whether these gender differences in loneliness are due to factors unique to the TESOL profession, and consider whether the cultures within which novice ESOL teachers work play a part in increased loneliness levels.

The current body of research indicates that being married or in a relationship is often negatively associated with loneliness (Hawthorne, 2008; Hawkley, Browne, & Cacioppo, 2005; Victor & Yang, 2012). However, it is surprising that this relationship was more profound for males. These findings could reflect gender differences in how relationships are defined and evaluated. A study by Stokes and Levin (1986) found that the quantity of relationships had a consistently negative relationship with loneliness for males but not for females, whereas females' perceptions of loneliness appeared to be influenced by how they rated the quality of their relationships. Though, as previously mentioned, these results may simply be due to gender differences in the propensity for discussing negative emotions and loneliness. Notably, these exploratory findings regarding the relationship between marital status, gender, and loneliness could indicate that males and those that are married may enjoy a certain amount of protection from loneliness as novice ESOL teachers. Other studies should examine how these characteristics and other factors can influence loneliness and stress for novices in the TESOL field.

Limitations

This study may have had several limitations that could impact the validity and generalizability of the findings. Firstly, there were only 47 participants, and, therefore, the sample size was relatively small. Although future examinations would benefit from a larger sample, this study recruited participants with heterogeneous backgrounds that were highly representative of the novice ESOL teacher population.

Additionally, approximately half of the participants were living and working in foreign countries (51%) when they completed the study. Research has shown that cross-cultural adjustments are associated with higher levels of loneliness (Chataway & Berry, 1989; Pruitt, 1978; Sam & Eide, 1991; Swami, 2009), and both increases and decreases in perceived stress for sojourning students living abroad (Ward & Kennedy, 1996; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013). Therefore, being located in a foreign country may have influenced

how the participants rated their perceptions of loneliness and stress. Future research should examine whether novice ESOL teachers living abroad are more likely to experience loneliness and stress compared to those living in their countries of origin.

It is important to note that 79% were still in the teaching profession and the qualitative data revealed that a few were in the process of moving and/or looking for new teaching jobs. Also, some had left teaching for other professions or personal reasons such as pregnancy. Although some of the participants were no longer teaching at the time of the survey, all of the participants had taught for a certain amount of time after completing their MA degrees.

Importantly, this study did not provide conclusive evidence that novice ESOL teachers are lonelier or more stressed than other groups and this concern should be addressed in future research. Moreover, the current findings are correlational in nature and the researchers would like to acknowledge that conclusions about the directionality of this relationship cannot be made based on this data. It is unclear if teachers' loneliness precedes stress, if their stress induces loneliness, or if additional factors are influencing this relationship. Therefore, future studies should explore how other factors, such as culturally based gender norms and individual traits, influence the relationship between loneliness and stress for novice ESOL teachers.

Conclusion

Ensuring that ESOL teachers are mentally healthy and satisfied with their working conditions could have significant implications for the success of the institutions that hire them and, consequently, the credibility of the TESOL programs that they are representing. Importantly, this examination of novice ESOL teachers' experiences with loneliness and stress could be a vital step toward understanding the factors that influence and improve TESOL professionals' mental health, job satisfaction, and occupational outcomes. The findings from this study suggest that mitigating feelings of loneliness may have a significant impact on the perceptions of stress experienced by novice ESOL teachers. Because many of the stressors encountered by novices in the TESOL field are associated with difficulties adjusting to the professional teaching environment and are thus often unavoidable, managing perceptions of loneliness could be an effective and accessible strategy for reducing perceptions of stress (Farrell, 2012). Therefore, pre-service, novice, and, potentially, experienced ESOL teachers may benefit from developing and maintaining professional relationships that could reduce feelings of isolation, and increase access to a

variety of social, emotional, and instrumental resources (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012). Additionally, since loneliness is a perception of inadequate access to social resources, novice TESOL professionals who experience loneliness may benefit from therapeutic activities that address the maladaptive cognitions that perpetuate feelings of loneliness (Masi, Chen, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2011). Lastly, these findings suggest that TESOL educational programs may be able to increase their students' preparedness and overall resiliency to stress by informing them of the potential dangers of loneliness and adding loneliness reduction strategies to the curriculum.

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